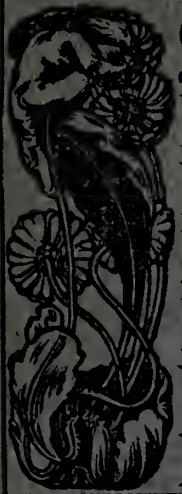


# LITTLE·ENGRAVINGS

CLASSICAL & CONTEMPORARY  
NUMBER·II·WILLIAM·BLAKE  
BEING·ALL·HIS·WOODCUTS  
PHOTOGRAPHICALLY·RE-  
PRODUCED·IN·FACSIMILE  
WITH·AN·INTRODUCTION  
BY·LAURENCE·BINYON



AT·THE·SIGN·OF·THE·UNICORN·VII·CECIL  
COURT·ST·MARTIN'S·LANE·LONDON·MDCCCCII











# LITTLE·ENGRAVINGS

CLASSICAL·&·CONTEMPORARY

NUMBER·II·WILLIAM·BLAKE

BEING·ALL·HIS·WOODCUTS

PHOTOGRAPHICALLY·RE-

PRODUCED·IN·FACSIMILE

WITH·AN·INTRODUCTION

By·LAURENCE·BINYON

AT·THE·SIGN·OF·THE·UNICORN·VII·CECIL  
COURT·ST·MARTIN'S·LANE·LONDON·MDCCCCII



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2015

<https://archive.org/details/williamblakebein00blak>



## INTRODUCTION

The name of William Blake has proved a magnet to violent opinions: he has been more praised and blamed than understood. His gift was complex, and his productions combined elements that are very rarely combined; hence confusions are to be found underlying his work, which have been reflected in the minds of his critics. In the present series we are only concerned with him as an artist.

Blake says somewhere: "The lavish praise I have received from all quarters, for invention and drawing, has generally been accompanied by this: 'He can conceive, but he cannot execute.' This absurd assertion has done, and may still do, me the greatest mischief." In spite of the artist's protest, this continues to be the current criticism on Blake's work. And yet the truth lies rather on the other side. It is not so much in his execution as in the failure to mature his conceptions that his defect is to be found. Those who disparage the technical side of art find no countenance from Blake, who maintained that "Ideas cannot be given but in their minutely appropriate words, nor can a design be made without its minutely appropriate execution." Certainly Blake cannot be accused of falling short of his own conceptions by want of craftsmanship.

Blake is at his best in his original engravings. The *Inventions to the Book of Job* are justly his most prized and famous work, and these it is proposed to reproduce in a later volume of this series. But the woodcuts, which form the present number, represent the artist in Blake with less alloy even than the *Job*. They are the only woodcuts he ever produced, and they were produced late in life. Blake was sixty-three, when, in 1820, he was commissioned by Dr. R. J. Thornton to design and engrave some small illustrations for a new edition of the doctor's *School Virgil*. This book contained the Eclogues in Latin, with English imitations in verse taken from the works of Pope, Shenstone, and others. The English imitation of the First Eclogue is by Ambrose Philips; and it was this poem of Philips which Blake was called in to illustrate. He made twenty sepia drawings, of which he engraved seventeen. Gilchrist tells us of the consternation of the publishers on receiving them. "This man," they cried, "must do no more"; and the blocks would all have been re-cut by other hands had not some timely words of praise from Lawrence, James Ward, and other artists revived Dr. Thornton's dashed faith in Blake. It was too late, however, to save the three remaining designs; they had been already cut by some other hand. These are illustrations to the comparisons in the last speech of Colinet in Philips' *Pastoral*; birds flying over a cornfield, ships on the ocean, and a winding river. We can tell from these what we should have lost if the same hand had been called in to engrave the other seventeen designs. The difference is enormous; for Blake's drawings

were not like the drawings made by the great German draughtsmen of Durer's time, nor like our English draughtsmen of the 'sixties, drawings which a skilled cutter could reproduce in facsimile; they were drawings in which the tint had to be translated into line. The professional workman, in engraving these three designs, absolutely destroyed the balance of the compositions and the character of the draughtsmanship. Blake had been trained from boyhood as a copper engraver, and was a practised and skilful wielder of the burin; but he was entirely new to work on the boxwood. Till the end of the eighteenth century woodcuts had been produced with a knife and a plank of pearwood; but the new method very quickly ousted the old; and by 1820, chiefly through the Bewicks and their school, wood-engraving in the modern sense had begun to come into its great popularity. Blake brought to the new material a mastery of his tool, free from that retarding influence of old tradition which hampered him throughout as a copper-engraver, so that he only half discovered his true manner late in life. He had, moreover, the priceless advantage of being at once designer and engraver. Some of the early wood-engravers, like the Bewicks, did original work; but very soon the art degenerated into the mechanically skilful reproduction of drawings supplied by illustrators, a tradition which no artist thought of breaking, after Blake's and Calvert's example, till William Morris took up the graver under the inspiration of Rossetti.

Blake's conceptions in these illustrations did not take their final form in the drawings; they were only fully realised on the block itself. Hence they have the character of visions called up as if by moonlight out of the darkened surface of the wood, and seem to have no existence apart from it. Most fortunate when least concerned to mature his conceptions, Blake seems to have worked in an unusually happy mood, striking out his ideas with a bold and swift suggestiveness, and that spontaneous sweet eloquence which is the charm of his best songs. The vital features of landscape grandeur, rural peace, even terror, are racily sketched, with a sense of the primeval and elemental in man and nature, seized and expressed as only whole-hearted directness can seize them and express them.

The imaginative potency of these designs is realised if we take a piece of blank paper, of the size of the blocks. How small it appears when compared with the print! One would not have imagined that the design could be contained in it.

That Blake stopped short where he did, improvising rather than elaborating, is the secret of the charm of these woodcuts. For his temperament unfitted him for success in carrying his work farther; his want was not lack of skill, but lack of patience. Everywhere in his work we trace the ardent desire to find in objects, which a purer artist would have studied primarily for their beauty, symbols for ideas; and

he is often so impetuous in his search as to forget not only the beauty but the natural significance of the objects he represents. Once found, the symbols are used as letters of an alphabet wherewith to spell sentences imaginatively prophetic of an unknown beyond. Thus the same attitudes of the human form recur again and again in his work. When the execution is slight and rapid, as in these woodcuts, we are brought immediately face to face with the glowing thoughts of the artist, and his ardour and energy delight us; but when the execution is elaborate we are conscious of something lost, or rather of the alloy introduced by Blake's effort to give something like the elaborate realisation of other artists to what he himself chiefly valued as a sort of hieroglyph.

Beside their aboriginal and intuitive expressiveness, these woodcuts possess another source of charm,—in the poetical and pictorial richness of their subject matter, which offered no temptation to allegory, yet appealed to the artist's faith and native delight in Arcadian simplicity. The motives were simple and highly congenial, and in realising them Blake seems to have drawn on the happy and serene memories of his stay at Felpham, on the Sussex coast, the only years of his life not spent in London, and among the happiest he ever spent. Of all his productions these seem the most satisfying; and in the history of wood-engraving they are numbered among the precious and far too rare examples of work in which the graving tool has been the direct instrument of an artist's thought, and the woodblock the recipient of his immediate inspiration.



## THENOT

Is it not Colinet I lonesome see  
Leaning with folded arms against the tree,  
Or is it age of late bedims my sight?









## COLINET

Nor lark would sing, nor linnet, in my state.  
Each creature, Thenot, to his task is born ;  
As they to mirth and music, I to mourn.

## THENOT

Yet though with years my body downward tend,  
As trees beneath their fruit in autumn bend,  
Spite of my snowy head and icy veins,  
My mind a cheerful temper still retains.







## COLINET

Thine ewes will wander; and the heedless lambs  
In loud complaints require their absent dams.

## THENOT

See Lightfoot; he shall tend them close; and I  
'Tween whiles across the plain will glance mine eye.

## COLINET

The riven trunk feels not the approach of spring;  
Nor birds among the leafless branches sing.  
Ill-fated tree! and more ill-fated I!









## THENOT

Sure thou in hapless hour of time wast born,  
When blightning mildews spoil the rising corn,  
Or when the moon, by wizard charm'd, foreshows,  
Blood-stain'd in foul eclipse, impending woes.

## THENOT

Nor fox, nor wolf, nor rot among our sheep:  
From these good shepherd's care his flock may keep.







COLINET

Unhappy hour! when fresh in youthful bud  
I left, Sabrina fair, thy silvery flood.

COLINET

A fond desire strange lands and swains to know.









## THENOT

A rolling stone is ever bare of moss.

## COLINET

The damp, cold greensward for my nightly bed,  
And some slant willow's trunk to rest my head.







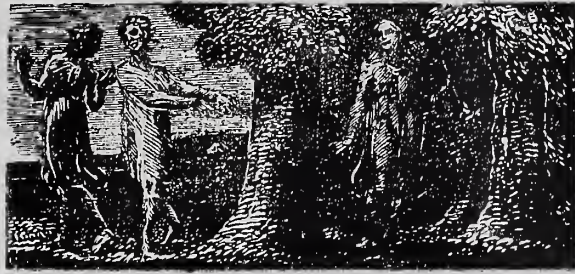
## COLINET

Untoward lads, the wanton imps of spite,  
Make mock of all the ditties I endite.

## THENOT

For him our yearly wakes and feasts we hold.









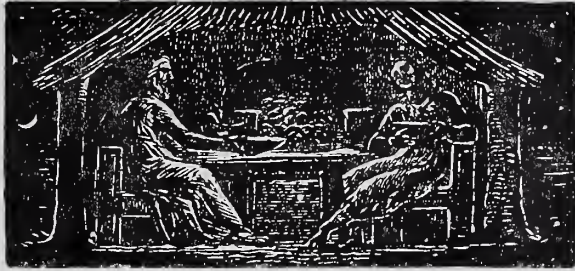
## THENOT

This night thy care with me forget, and fold  
Thy flock with mine.

## THENOT

New milk, and clouted cream, mild cheese and curd,  
With some remaining fruit of last year's hoard,  
Shall be our evening fare.







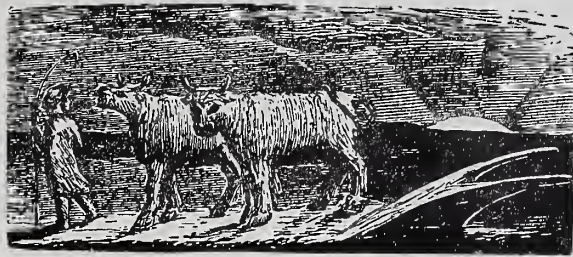
THENOT

With songs the jovial hinds return from plow.

THENOT

And unyok'd heifers, loitering homeward, low.









HERE · ENDS · WILLIAM · BLAKE · BY · LAURENCE  
BINYON · BEING · NUMBER · II · OF · LITTLE  
ENGRAVINGS · EDITED · BY · T · STURGE · MOORE  
PRINTED · BY · MORRISON · AND · GIBB · LIMITED  
TANFIELD · EDINBURGH · FOR · THE · UNICORN  
PRESS · LIMITED · LONDON · AND · FOR · LONG-  
MANS · GREEN · & · CO · NEW · YORK · MDCCCCII



THE UNICORN  
PRESS











GETTY CENTER LIBRARY



3 3125 00003 9681

